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ABSTRACT

Most institutions of higher education have a mission that specifically addresses three areas: instruction, research, and service. The repertoire of activities and the complexity of the goals of the University Library mirror the goals of the institution, the academic units, and the faculty. The clients of the library are the students, the faculty, and the community at large in all three goal areas of the University; hence assessment of the library must take into account not only the three outcome areas, but the three client groups as well. More than a service unit for the institution's instructional activities, the library itself offers instruction in information retrieval and, as a research facility, interacts with the research strategies of all disciplines. Besides students and faculty, the library increasingly serves the wider community outside the institution, especially through electronic networks that extend nationally and internationally. The library's ability to access information through electronic networks also renders simple circulation figures or the number of holdings inaccurate as an evaluation measure. The methodology used to assess the library must take these realities into account. The best evaluations will be comprehensive, taking care to sample all client groups. A variety of techniques should be used, including print questionnaires specifically designed for the library being evaluated; individual interviews that take into account the complexity of library services and can elicit satisfactory information; focus groups; observation of library use; document analysis, and transactional analysis. A comprehensive assessment would call for a combination of all these methods, if comprehensive is defined as addressing the service of all client groups in all service areas. A more reasonable approach would be to design focus questions that state the most important concerns of the library and build methodological packages that address those concerns in a frugal manner. (Contains 19 references.) (KRN)

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Assessment Information and the Library: The case of a Multi-site, Multi-client Service

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Most institutions of higher education have a mission which specifically addresses instruction, research and service. While some institutions have rank ordered the three elements of the mission, few universities have restricted the range to fewer than three. Faculty and academic departments generally embrace the three roles as equal partners in their objectives. However, academic support units for the most part have goals and objectives that support only one aspect of the institutional mission, e.g., extension services supporting primarily the service aspect of the institutional mission. While specialized units cannot help but be touched by the activities of the units in the different goal areas (e. g., the dissemination of research results by extension), generally their focus makes their work clearly targeted to a single client population. This is not the case for the University Library. The repertoire of activities and the complexity of the goals of the Library mirror the goals of the institution, the academic units and the faculty.

The library is more than a service unit for the instructional goals of the institution. Recent technological advances have made libraries more than simply the caretakers of an on-site collection where circulation is the only concern. (Barreau, 1988) While the quality of the collection on-site will impact any evaluation of the library, today the ability to locate off-site material is growing in importance. (Belanger & Thorne, 1986) Librarians have become information managers in the best sense of that phrase. Not only do they serve the campus community, but computer networks have integrated them locally, nationally, and internationally, expanding the service dimension of their work. (Franklin, 1986) As a research facility, the library has to be familiar with and sensitive to the research strategies of all of the disciplines. In many disciplines, the library is the sole source of research material. The quality of information retrieval efforts ether supports or stymies the work of the faculty. (Anderson & Stenstrom, 1989) Its instructional mission is more than the simple support of the instructional program of the academic departments (Selin, 1988 or Shil, 1979), it provides direct instruction in the use of the library. (Chadley & Gavryck, 1989) Students coming to the University for the first time encounter a multi-site library organized around the disciplines in many cases. The sheer physical plant differences between University Libraries and other units on

campus make them unique. (Taylor & Viegas, 1988)

The clients of the library are then the students, the faculty and the community at large in all three goal areas of the University. Assessment of the library must take into account not only the three outcome areas, but the three client groups. No longer can simple circulation or holdings be characterized as a measure of library quality. (Bookstein, 1981)

Figure 1 shows the range of the service components of the library. Notice that the matrix shows services in all three goal areas which are provided directly to a client group and service which is support in the work of the client group. The variety of service forms additionally complicates a complete description of library service. For instance, in the goal area of instruction, the library provides direct instruction to students on the use of the library, but also supports both students and faculty in the achievement of curricular or course goals by the maintenance of reserve materials and facilitating searches for course papers, as well as maintaining a collection that meets the needs of the curriculum. (Alm, et al., 1989) Also, in the area service, direct activities are aimed as each of the groups, while support services are provided to faculty as they in term provide service to the community. This makes the use of client perspective particularly difficult in assessment. Questions must be designed to address the direct service and to address support services. Sampling procedures must be designed to include both those who have received direct service and those who have received support services.

To illustrate this point, consider the upper left hand cell in the matrix, students as clients and instruction as the goal area. In this situation, one has to consider the direct instruction provided by the library personnel on the use of the library and the support services provided by the library as students complete work in other courses, e.g., reserve material maintenance, search assistance, etc.. (Tribble, 1991) In other words, organizing an assessment plan by client group (or columns in the figure) requires not only that all rows are considered, but that the type of service be carefully articulated so that clients can differential direct service from support services. Clearly, in a graduate institution students perceptions of the library service they receive during the independent research stage of their academic career must be considered.

On the other hand, one may try to organize an assessment plan around the goal areas (across the rows of the matrix of service), acknowledging that the focus on any one row misrepresents the full range of service in the library. If one is interested in assessing the extent to which the library supports the instructional program of the University, one must carefully articulate what support means. (Watson & Boon, 1989) It must include the extent to which the collection supports the curriculum, the use made of the facility by students for study time, the use made of the facility by the faculty as they revise syllabi and develop reserve materials. All of the clients must be considered in the assessment.

These methods of characterizing library service in terms of the mission of the library are different than the traditional evaluations of library services which have used the organizational structure of the library as the organizer, e. g., reference desk services. (Christensen et al., 1989) There is no reason to believe that one conception of providing information to librarians is necessarily better than another. (Shaughnessy, 1987) However, information based on the goals of the institution rather than the organizational structure of the library are likely to provide an opportunity to reflect on the organizational structure. (Lancaster, 1990)

Matching Methodology to Information Needs

Assessment has been characterized as information which improves the services provided to students. However, as it is currently operationalized assessment tends to address only the instructional goal of an institution, while program review systems for academic departments include all three goal areas. For the most part, assessment literature has ignore the research and service goals of an institution and ignored the importance of unit which serve those goals. Service quality assessment in the library must take into consideration all of the goals and activities in order to give the librarians the information for improvement or clearly state that the plan systematically misrepresent the outcome areas of the unit. Comprehensive assessment of the library comes closer to a service quality meaning of assessment even when it is done narrowly.

The narrowness of an assessment plan is generally characterized by the number of questions used to focus the study or the number of variables addressed. Let me suggest that in the case of

the library, the assessment plan is narrowed not only by focus questions, but also by the methodology used to collect the data and the number and way samples are drawn. Narrowing by focus questions (concentrating on a subset of the cells represented in Figure 1) preserves the quality of the assessment because it acknowledges the other legitimate services which are ignored in the assessment. Narrowing by either the use of a restricted range of methodologies or by restricting the client groups and/or the methods of sampling probably misrepresent the quality of the assessment. The data do not acknowledge the errors inherent in any methodology.

Figure 2 crosses the three client groups of the library with six primary methodologies of library assessment that have been discussed in the literature. Sampling considerations are explicitly shown for the first three data collection techniques. Let us consider the restrictions in comprehensiveness of focus questions that are inherent in the selection of each of these techniques, putting aside the obvious differences in the cost of the methodologies used. Clearly these methods differ not only with respect to the personnel costs of implementation, but also with respect to cost of time period during which data are collected and the analysis techniques required. My concern is not with the obvious differences in feasibility, but with the most subtle differences in bias.

Population Definition and Sampling Bias

Several of these techniques require self-report information from a group of the clients. Given that fact, that a census of the three client groups is never an acceptable strategy, some sampling plan must be designed. If the sampling plan is not created in a thoughtful, reflective manner, the extent of bias in the information will not be known. Generalizations are likely to be made with a data set that simply does not warrant confidence. The first problem to be addressed is the definition of the populations of clients.

The definition of the community being served has changed on a number of campuses in the United States. Computer linkages between public libraries and University libraries has opened the library to a large group of individuals from high school students in small communities hundreds of miles from the campus to the state and local planners of governmental programs. The list of potential users of the library in the community depends on the manner in which the University has

given access to its facilities. The definition of the faculty and student client groups probably seem the easiest -- all faculty at the institution, including visiting scholars, part-time faculty, adjunct faculty, research faculty, etc. and all students, including those formally enrolled in courses, those completing courses not finished from previous terms, those doing independent research, and alumni. Defining the group may be easier than finding a list with all of the names. And notice, that these conceptual definitions of the populations require lists of names for the sampling unit. If the populations of students and faculty were defined in terms of courses offered during a specific term, the sample could be drawn from a list of sections. But as long as more than the formal instructional goals of the institution are the focus of the assessment, the population must include individuals who are being served in other goal areas.

The most obvious error that can be made in sampling is to sample on-site. The definition of the population as all those who are physically in the library removes from consideration those who use the library electronically as a research facility whether they be faculty or students and those faculty who design the library into aspects of their courses. Additionally, one must be concerned with the ebb and flow of use of the library facilities. On-site data collection would have to be conducted at all library branches during all the hours they were open during a semester -- a formidable task at a research intensive University.

The second most frequent error was alluded to earlier -- sampling sections or specific classrooms. Distribution of questionnaires in classrooms or classroom interviews creates a problem with the unit of analysis as well as a problem of generalizing to the appropriate population. If the data are analyzed at the individual student level, the requirements of particular courses will be over emphasized in relation to the class size. For instance, if one of the classes in the sample is a 350 student section which requires one research paper with a restricted list of topics, this type of library use will overshadow ten sections where students are required to complete not only research papers, but complete comprehensive bibliographies which address unique problems. Even if the directions during data collection specify that the answers should be in terms of all courses not the particular course in which the data collection is taking place, the

reactive effects of the location of data collection are quite strong. If the sample is drawn by classroom, the data must be analyzed by classroom means. Given that the number of sections is much smaller than the number of individuals in the population, the relative size of the sample to the population list for classrooms will be higher than the relative size of a sample drawn from a population list of individuals. The size of the sample in terms of individuals will necessarily be quite high. Specific individuals may be required to provide data a number of times, unless the sample is drawn so that typical co-enrollment courses are eliminated from the list.

A third form of bias has to do with misidentification of the population rather than a problem of sampling plan. Consider the case sampling students by simply using the Residence Hall dwellers as representative of the population of students. Clearly the population of students at most Universities is considerably more complex including graduates living in University housing as well as all students who reside off-campus. The bias introduced by this population definition is so powerful that a sampling design cannot overcome the flaws introduced in the data. A similar error can be made with respect to the faculty by defining the faculty to be full-time, tenure-track faculty. Not only does this definition exclude from consideration those faculty who have appoints purely as researchers, thus distorting the client group in the research area of service. But also, it restricts the range of faculty in the instructional program of the University by eliminating part-time and adjunct faculty. These biases may particularly damage the descriptive power of the data set if there are systematic differences in the hiring practices across the disciplines in the University.

Clearly, assessment designs must take into consideration who is queried as well as how those queries are made.

Print Questionnaires

Luckily for assessment specialists, there are a variety of resources available for the development of questionnaires. (Association of Research Libraries, 1982) Unfortunately, sometimes the temptation to use something off the shelf without tailoring it to fit a specific institution is too great. The plan for a print questionnaire must begin with a table of specifications which considers all three of the goal areas. Forms of the questionnaire must be developed for each

of the client groups targeting both the direct and support services available from the library. Overlap of items which address services common to the three client groups is essential as well as targeting special services for each of the client groups. Considering that the range of service involves the items housed in the library, circulation components with respect to books and computers, aspects of electronic service, aspects of personal service and the physical environment, the list of potential questions is likely to be formidable. Consideration of the response rate demands that the item pool be composed of primarily forced choice items so that the burden on the respondents is reduced to the absolute minimum. Consequently, questionnaire developers must know a great deal about typical patterns of library use. Additionally, it is unlikely that any one individual is a user of all possible services of the library. Consequently, the questionnaire must be designed not only to easily allow the respondent to indicate his or her satisfaction with a particular service, but also to allow him or her to indicate that they are a non-user. The idiosyncratic nature of the interaction between discipline and library use mitigates against the use of matrix sampling techniques which would reduce the burden on a particular respondent. Questionnaires are likely to be designed with "branching," i.e., targeted questions for special users, which increases the complexity of the response task.

Consequently, the design task of the form is to keep the demand on the respondent small enough to enhance the probability of response while asking enough questions to provide sufficient scope for the assessment questions. The selection of this method may restrict the range of focus questions for the study merely because of the need to keep the questionnaire short. The need for forced choice items means that the data will not necessarily provide a rich description of the rationales for the judgments of satisfaction made by the members of the client groups.

Individual Interviews

The complex and idiosyncratic nature of library service which necessitates "branching" in the questions which may reduce the response rate in print questionnaires can be easily addressed with individual interviews. Trained interviewers can seamlessly guide a respondent through the maze of possible uses of the library and elicit satisfaction information. Or the organization of the interview

schedule can be less a priori, following the advice of qualitative researchers to allow the respondents to self report their judgments with little or no structure. The problem of depth of information is also solved with the interviewers capacity for follow-up questions. Persons who are less than willing to write long explanations of how they use the library are likely to explain their use to an interviewer as long as the time requirement for the interview is reasonable. Changing methodologies does not completely solve the scope problem. Response rate for interviews are also attenuated by the length of the interview. Asking every conceivable question about library operation is not a viable schedule planning technique. The one clear advantage of the interview is the ability to design complex "branching" systems that would be difficulty to manage in a print medium.

Focus Groups

The marketing strategy of focus group interviews has become widely used as an evaluation techniques. (Widdows et al., 1991) The evaluative use of a focus group merely means a group interview conducted with a restricted interview schedule. The use of the focus group method introduces group process biases into the data collection strategy. Consequently, the composition of the group becomes very important. Three clear alternatives are available: using intact classrooms as the focus groups, constructing groups on the basis of homogeneous client representatives, or constructing groups heterogeneously across the client groups. Each of the alternatives carry with it a systematic bias to the information collected in the group. Focus groups conducted in the classroom setting are tied to the requirements of the course. Consequently, a number of group interviews must be conducted to draw a representative sample of the institution. Focus groups conducted with homogeneous groups, i.e., graduate students from the natural sciences, or the fine arts, undergraduate students from engineering or health sciences, faculty from the humanities, etc. contain the same sort of disciplinary bias. On the other hand, heterogeneous focus groups are biased from the power differential present in the group. If the focus group is made up of faculty, undergraduate students and graduate students, the differences in their status within the organization will temper the amount of information collected from each type. Multiple

focus groups of this type will not necessarily provide a comprehensive data base from which to make judgments.

Observation

Most of the previously described techniques ask the client to self report satisfaction with a service as well as to indicate whether a service was used. The satisfaction component would either be missing or an assumption would have to be made that judged some behaviors as satisfied and others as unsatisfied. Additionally, while observation is clearly the best way to describe the use of the library, the services of the library are no longer confined to a specific site. Online catalogs and search mechanisms have delivered library services to faculty offices, residence hall rooms and off-campus apartments. This technique has the same problem of sampling on the library site for questionnaires or interviews. Thus, the scope of the questions of the assessment are restricted. However, observation does give an excellent (unfiltered) view of the use of the library facility. Assessments which are designed to focus on the needs of the clients must include a component of observation to formulate an index of wait time at terminals and service desks.

Document Analysis

Document analysis presumes that the quality of the library service is exhibited in the work of the client groups. The problem of population definition in this case is very similar to the problems encountered by meta-analysts. How does one find copies of everything that was written using the library? Or how can you tell which portions of a document are the result of a satisfactory relationship with the library and which are the result of dissatisfactory experiences. The list of document that might be relevant to this technique clearly must cross all of the client groups. Documents produced by students include not only papers prepared for classes, but also theses and dissertations. All easily accessible, but restricted to students in the goal area of instruction. One must also capture the student researcher by searches of the published material in the disciplines and the collections such as ERIC. The documents for the faculty, likewise, cannot be arbitrarily restricted to their roles as researchers, but also must include a review of syllabi and other course materials to capture the support provided by the library to the instructional mission of the

University. Community member service may appear in documents such as minutes of meeting, newspaper articles, letters to the editor, etc.

Transaction Analysis

Transaction analysis misses the services of the library that are based upon purely personal contact. It presumes that the use of the library service is totally defined by electronic searching or circulation indicators. (Day & O'Donovan, 1988) This method controls for the bias selective perception that may be present in self-report data. (Nielsen, 1986) The analysis of search strategies may uncover the need for education of library users. Analysis of interlibrary loan may indicate systematic needs in the collection.

Summary

Each of the techniques used in assessment narrows the information available to librarians to improve service. A comprehensive assessment would obviously call for a combination of these methods, if comprehensive is defined as addressing the service of all client groups in all goal areas. A more reasonable approach would be to design focus questions for the assessment that stated the most important concerns in the library and build methodological packages that address those concerns in a frugal manner.

	Students	Faculty	Community
Instruction	Direct Support	Support	
Research	Support	Direct Support	Support
Service	Direct	Direct Support	Direct

Figure 1: Service Matrix of a University Library

	Students	Faculty	Community
Print Questionnaire Mailed Classroom On-Site			
Individual Interview On-Site Random Selection			
Focus Group Homogeneous Form Heterogeneous Form Classroom Form			
Observation			
Document Analysis			
Transaction Analysis			

Figure 2: Analysis of Client Groups by Data Collection Methodology

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